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# Creating A Strong Image for the Economic Enhancement of Downtown Ayer

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**CREATING A STRONG IMAGE  
FOR THE ECONOMIC ENHANCEMENT  
OF DOWNTOWN AYER**

**Town of Ayer, Massachusetts**

***July 1996***

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The recent closure of Fort Devens has had an undeniable impact on business in downtown Ayer, Massachusetts, deflating both the town's population level and its economy. Downtown business in Ayer has traditionally served several surrounding communities, and it is fundamental to the survival of Ayer's economy that this business continue to thrive. Facing a future that will lack the economic boost formerly associated with Fort activity, business owners and the town must make a greater effort to attract downtown commerce. In the midst of these changes, residents and business owners have participated with town officials in planning for the future, including updating the town's Comprehensive Plan.

Additional development that will benefit downtown is already underway, including new business growth and the upgrading of a commuter rail facility that links Ayer with Boston. Downtown Ayer will also soon be a terminus for an eleven-mile bicycle rail trail, which promises to draw many users into downtown Ayer. In conjunction with these development efforts, it is crucial that the downtown be made more appealing to visitors. This includes enhancing downtown's public image, improving parking and pedestrian accessibility, and amending zoning bylaws to maximize economic and development potential.

This study encourages continued communication between town officials and citizens of Ayer in enhancing the image of Downtown. The identification of issues and development of recommendations for this report is based largely on the input of downtown business owners and shop merchants.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background on Ayer

The town of Ayer is located in Middlesex County, Massachusetts, approximately 35 miles northwest of Boston and 20 miles northeast of Worcester. Ayer is bordered on the west by the Nashua River and the town of Shirley, on the north by Groton, on the east by Littleton, and on the south by Harvard. The town is approximately nine square miles, and had a 1990 population of 6,871. The railroad industry was a major force in the historic growth and development of Ayer. Known as Groton Junction until its incorporation in 1871, the Town of Ayer flourished as a central hub of railroad activity during the 1840s and through the early nineteenth century. At one point the town supported four rail lines, and many railroad-related services and facilities prospered as a result. Ayer's access to major highways, including State Route 2 and Interstate Highways 495 and 290, ensured continued business growth after the decline of railroad transport in the mid-nineteenth century.

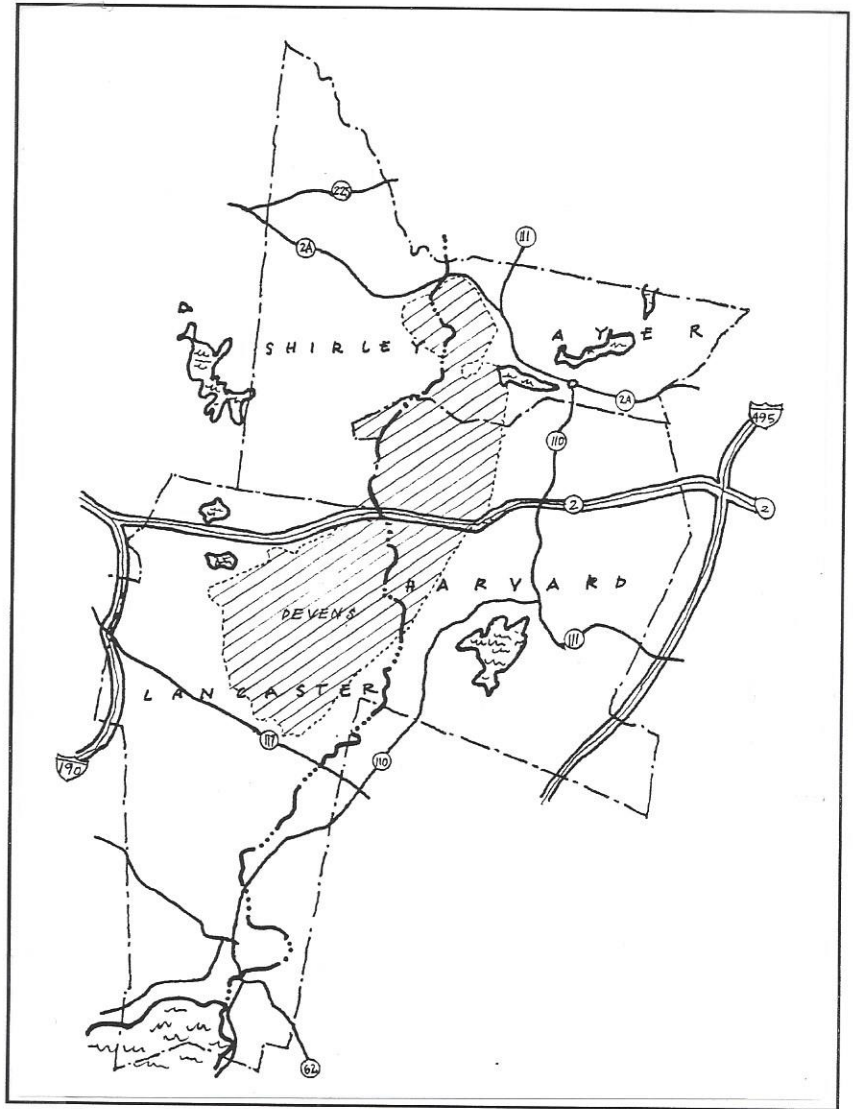


Figure 1.1. Map of Devens and surrounding towns.

Fort Devens also played a significant role in the town's history; Ayer is one of four towns which were host to Fort Devens, including Leominster, Harvard, and Shirley (refer to Figure 1.1). With nearly 8,000 former employees, the Fort was a major economic influence in the region, and was home to 842 of Ayer's residents in 1990 (VHB 1995, 5). Military activity at

Fort Devens was closed in 1995. Currently, the Devens "District" is under development as a planned business community. Ayer's population has been directly affected by the closing of the Fort, decreasing by more than one-third between 1990 and 1995.

This has had an unavoidable economic impact on Ayer's business district. Located in the heart of town, about the intersection of State Routes 111 and 2A, Ayer's traditional downtown remains the core of its commercial activity. Downtown Ayer serves as a focal point for business and commerce for neighboring towns as well. Despite this, many of its businesses are struggling to survive. In addition, the downtown suffers from daily traffic congestion, insufficient parking accommodations, and a slightly run-down appearance.

The town of Ayer has wonderful natural resources, including the scenic Nashua River corridor and a chain of small ponds and rivers. Some of the many recreational and outdoor activities that can be enjoyed in Ayer include fresh water fishing, boating and canoeing, camping and hiking.

## **1.2. Project Overview**

The town of Ayer contracted with the Center for Economic Development at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst to guide and facilitate the participation of Ayer's business community in planning for the economic development of Downtown. In light of the recent closure of Fort Devens, this is a particularly timely exercise, as appropriate planning is crucial to the survival and prosperity of Ayer's economy.

The goals of this study are to:

- encourage community participation in the planning process;
- outline preliminary recommendations to enhance the image of downtown Ayer and to maximize it's market potential;
- delineate boundaries for downtown Ayer; and to
- define the character and use of each of the four primary downtown districts.

This written report represents the product of these goals. It will present a number of preliminary recommendations, based largely upon citizen input, and will summarize the results of community planning efforts.



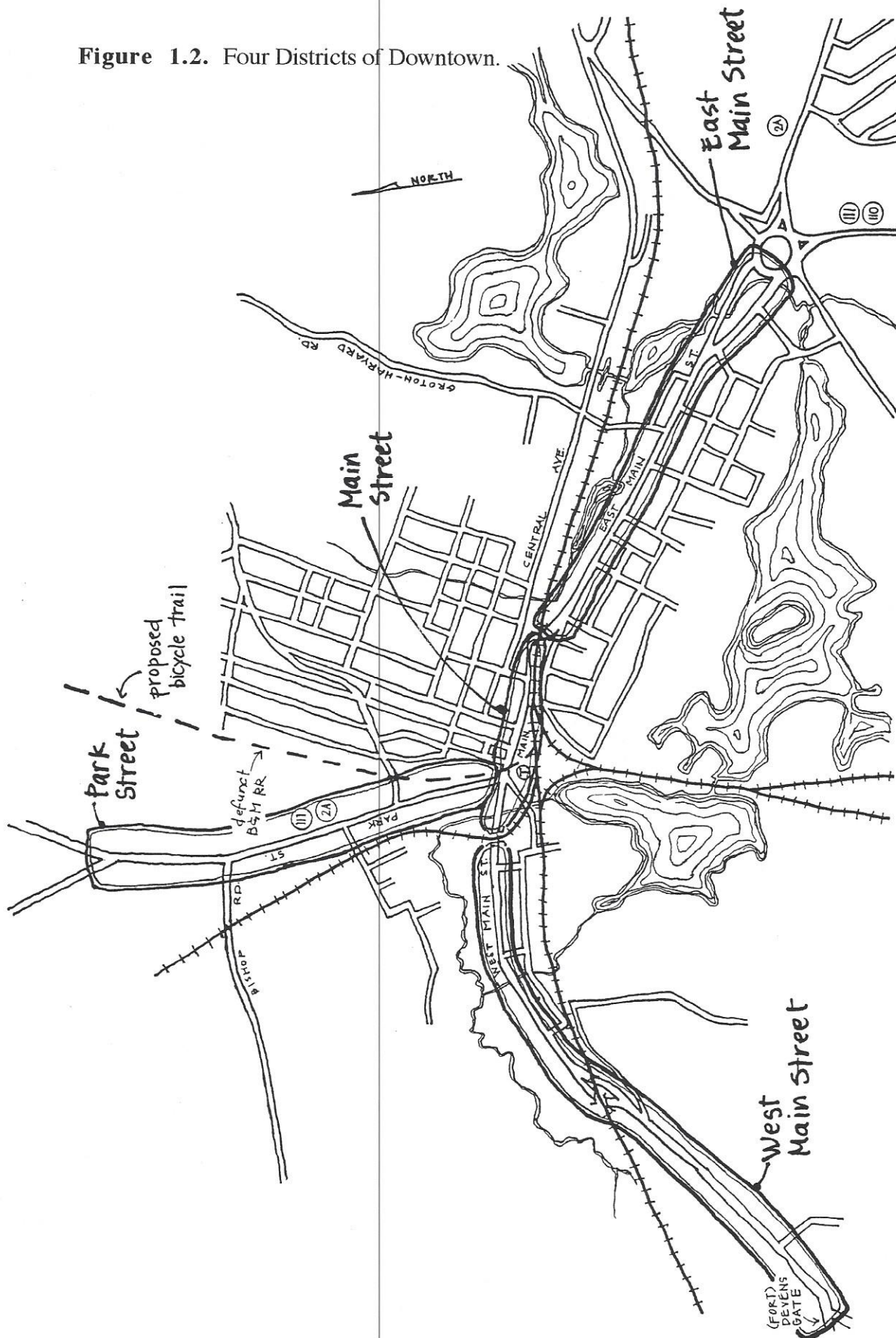
### **1.3. Current Studies and Improvement Programs**

Proper planning is paramount in ensuring the efficiency and cost effectiveness of Ayer's development and improvement efforts. The town recently completed Phase I of its newly updated Comprehensive Plan and early this fall will begin the process of developing Phase II. Together these documents will provide a basis for guidance for the town's future endeavors. The downtown improvement study is one of several efforts already underway toward fulfilling goals outlined in the Comprehensive Plan Update. Specifically, it is in line with some of the goals and objectives listed under "Land Use and Community Character" in Phase I of the Plan.

New development in downtown also makes this planning exercise particularly pertinent. The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority's (MBTA) commuter rail services Ayer's downtown railroad platform and is one of the region's most heavily used stops (VHB 1995, 5). The MBTA has plans to upgrade service to Ayer, including increasing the frequency of departures and making improvements to the facility. The commuter rail currently provides daily service from downtown Ayer to Boston's North Station, with transportation times averaging 66–73 minutes. Parking near the platform is severely limited, however, and as a result commuter rail patrons often occupy spaces intended for customers of downtown retail establishments.

In addition, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management (DEM) is in the process of completing design and development plans for a twelve-mile long bicycle trail that will connect Ayer with Dunstable. Massachusetts Highway money and federal funding allocated through the Inter-modal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) will be used to redevelop the former Groton line of the Boston & Maine Railroad which begins in Ayer just behind commercial property on the east side of Park Street (refer to map of downtown Ayer, Figure 1.2), and runs north-south through Groton and Pepperell. This will have a great impact on downtown as the bike trail promises to attract a constant and heavy volume of seasonal users to Ayer. Businesses in town could benefit from the spending potential of these users by catering to their needs and tastes.

Figure 1.2. Four Districts of Downtown.





## II. CREATING A STRONG IMAGE FOR DOWNTOWN AYER

### 2.1. Goals and Objectives

The first goal of this project is to encourage and facilitate the participation of Ayer's downtown business community in planning for the economic development of their business district. Concerned members and town representatives actively participated in several early morning meetings over the course of eight weeks to discuss problems and issues which face the various downtown districts. As a final product, most regular attendees, as well as additional concerned community members and officials, participated in a Saturday morning charrette to further discuss and outline more definitive plans for the future of their Downtown.



**Figure 2.1.** *Ayer business community plans for the future of their downtown.*

Keeping in mind the broader goal of enhancing the economic vitality of Downtown, Ayer's business community identified and discussed several problem areas and potential solutions which would improve their downtown district. Image is paramount in these economic improvements because it plays such a vital role in the perceptions of visitors as well as the pride of town residents. Lacking a safe and pleasant environment, even the most appropriate services and resources will fail to attract the business necessary for Downtown to thrive.

As a first point in planning for downtown, business owners and residents took a step back to make a realistic assessment of their Downtown and the image which it portrays. They considered where there was potential for improvement, and identified changes which could be made immediately. Simple and economical measures such as prompt removal of graffiti and effective window washing maintenance can make a notable impact in conveying the image of a safe, inviting atmosphere and evidence of pride in ownership. From a visitor's perspective, downtown should be an attractive place, offering both reason and opportunity to stop and visit. Furthermore, in evaluating the image that Downtown projects, it is not only important to consider the existing environment, but it is also significant to make note of features which are absent. For instance, convenient parking is essential, and clean public rest rooms would be a valuable asset. Investment in improvements such as these can show a significant return.

The third specific goal of this study is to delineate boundaries for downtown Ayer, which can generally be broken down into four distinct districts, each with its own unique character (refer to map of downtown Ayer, Figure 1.2). To a certain degree, the limits of these districts are determined by user perception. However, additional distinctions can be made on the basis of use, spatial relationships, style and use of signage, and the presence or absence of pedestrian amenities such as sidewalks and shade trees. Finally, this study will help the town of Ayer to recognize each downtown district as a unique character area, each requiring different and specific guidelines to optimize its user potential.

## **2.2. Four Downtown Districts**

Commercial and business activity in Ayer is historically associated with the railroad junction, thus the traditional core of business in Ayer is along Main Street, approximately located just north of the rail platform which currently serves as MBTA's commuter rail stop. As Ayer has grown, particularly as a result of activity associated with Fort Devens, commercial and business facilities have spread north along Park Street, and laterally along both East and West Main Streets. Each of these four areas has taken on a unique character, and for the purpose of this report each will be discussed individually.

The **Main Street** area of downtown is the core of business and commercial activity in Ayer, consisting of a four block commercial district which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. For the purpose of this study, the Main Street district is limited by the railroad overpass on the east, it's intersection with Park Street and back lot lines on the north, the steel truss bridge on the west, and the railroad tracks and junction on the south. In general, the older portion of this district developed along the north side of the street during the early nineteenth



century, primarily in support of the bustling streetcar and railroad activity which occupied the southern portion of the street. Among these early structures there is an interesting variety of two- and three-story, late-nineteenth century architectural styles and storefronts (many now modified). The height of buildings on the south side of the street is notably lower, consisting of one- and two-story structures; these generally were built-up during the twentieth century, well after the decline of rail-related industry.



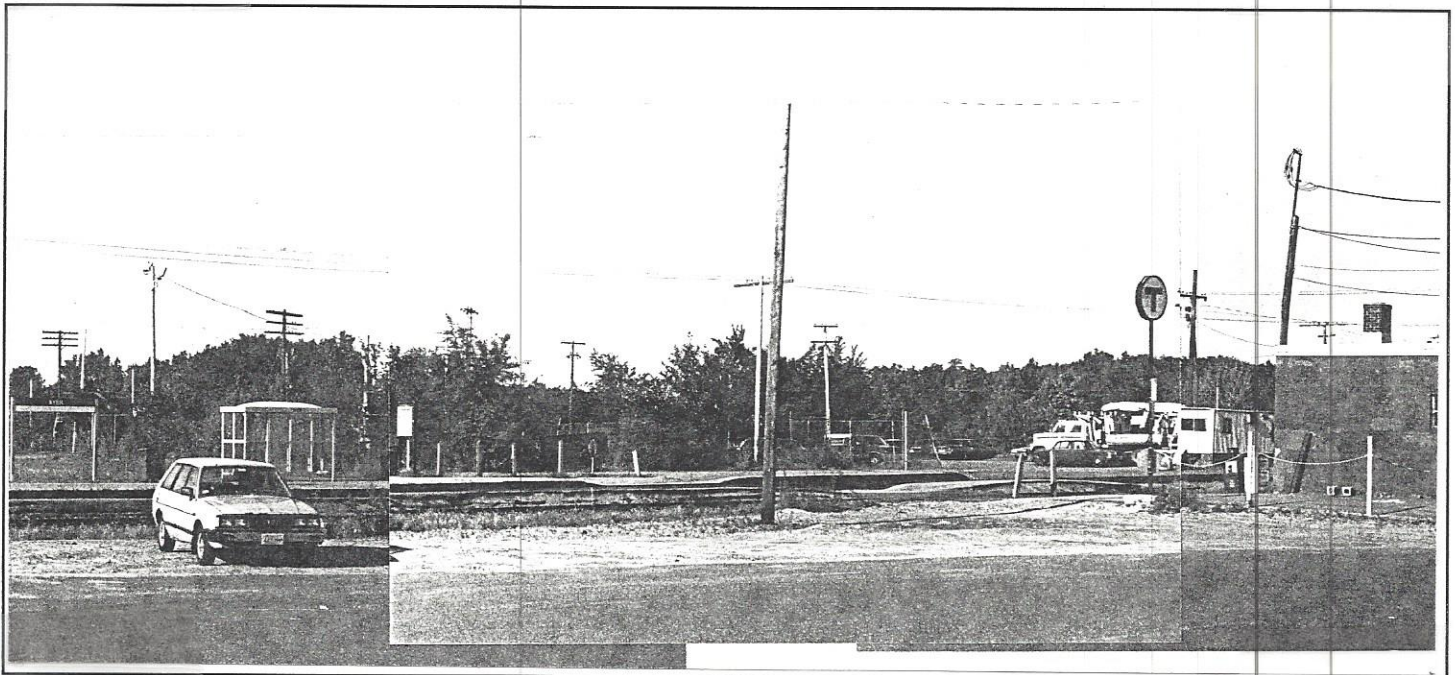
**Figure 2.2.** *Vacant second story and boarded windows of Richardson Building on Main Street.*

The building setback on Main Street is fairly consistent, and the sidewalk pattern and historic lighting also contribute to the streetscape's coherency. The rhythm of the sidewalk is broken-up a bit by the absence or presence of awnings, pockets of green space between buildings, and variations in door recesses and display window shapes. Shaded sidewalks also contribute to a pleasant pedestrian experience. Main Street is host to a variety of local retail and service shops, restaurants, the Town Hall, and two banks. While every street-level storefront on Main Street is occupied, several of the upper levels remain vacant. As such, many second-story windows are boarded, which conveys a rather run-down appearance (see to Figure 2.2). Current zoning is prohibitive to the development of these units in that new uses are required to provide on-site parking, which is nearly impossible on Main Street due to existing physical constraints. In addition, many of upper levels in these historic structures are in violation of building code;

meeting this would require some rehabilitative investment and interest on the part of owners. Furthermore, developing these units as apartments would require an amendment to zoning bylaws as mixed use is not permitted in the downtown district.

The Town has made efforts to improve the appearance of downtown core by hanging banners on lampposts along Main Street, as well as with general maintenance efforts, such as keeping trash receptacles empty, re-painting pedestrian crosswalks and handicap parking spaces, and ensuring proper maintenance of vegetation which screens noisy railroad tracks. Shop merchants have also shown a good deal of enthusiasm and support for enhancing Main Street's image. By sweeping stoops, cleaning windows and encouraging neighbors' participation, they are showing that no effort is too small or insignificant. In addition, many of these merchants and property owners have shown their concern by regularly participating in meetings to discuss downtown planning issues.

The MBTA commuter rail facility (Figure 2.3) draws a good number of people directly into the downtown, but unfortunately the consumer potential of this group is hardly tapped. The stop is located on the railroad platform, behind the stores on the south side of Main Street, and patrons generally arrive in the morning before most shops are open. The MBTA facility currently provides parking for commuters, however, because it is located behind the shops, most commuters never even see the front of the stores. In addition, the parking supply seems to be



**Figure 2.3.** *Downtown Ayer's MBTA commuter rail facility.*



inadequate, as some of the precious few parking spaces along Main Street—intended for shoppers—are consistently encroached upon by commuter rail patrons (and even by shop employees). The MBTA agency has plans to upgrade the site, which will include station improvements as well as a re-configuration of the parking lot to accommodate additional spaces. It has been suggested that locating commuter parking just north of Main Street will require rail patrons to at least walk past shops in order to reach the terminal, thus increasing the effectiveness of window advertisements and the potential for purchases.

**Park Street** generally runs north-south, its southern terminus meeting Main Street at the intersection of Routes 2A and 111. On the west, the Park Street district is limited by the back lot lines of frontage properties; on the southeast it is limited by the far boundary of the railroad right-of-way, and by the back lot lines of frontage properties to the north of Groton Street. The northern boundary of this district is a point of contention among some community members, but for practical intents and purposes, it can be marked where the road forks at Tiny's restaurant.

This district is just around the corner from the pedestrian-oriented core of downtown Ayer, yet it begins to take on the characteristics of a commercial strip (see Figure 2.4). Most of the business along Park Street is highway-oriented, and several in fact are directly automobile-



**Figure 2.4.** *Park Street begins to take on the characteristics of a commercial strip.*

related, such as the Exxon gas and service station, Jiffy Lube, a used car dealership, and NAPA auto parts. In addition to these, there is a mini drive-through plaza with a Dunkin Donuts and a Subway. Although many of the commercial businesses here are part of national chains or franchises, the managers and merchants for the most part are local residents, many of whom participated in the meetings and planning charrette, and who show an interest in making Park Street more pedestrian-friendly.

A few examples of Park Street establishments that could be better-suited for pedestrian-oriented service are: a dry cleaning service, a florist, a laundromat, a Fleet Bank branch (at the corner of Main Street), a convenience store plaza, and a restaurant called La Sita. In addition, development of two new establishments is anticipated in the form of an Aubuchon Hardware store and a credit union branch. These business owners, in particular, could benefit from making Park Street more accessible to pedestrians. Mixed among these various business and commercial uses are a few residential homes, one of which is a fairly dilapidated historic house on Park Street's east side, positioned between La Sita restaurant and Grafax Blueprinting (see Figure 2.5). The house is abandoned and the structure itself is in a state of disrepair; the yard is strewn with junk and lawn maintenance is sorely neglected. This property is perceived as a deterrent to business and development, and is the source of much resentment on the part of neighboring owners.



**Figure 2.5.** *Abandoned house in the midst of Park Street business.*



The Nashua River Bicycle Rail Trail is scheduled for development will begin in the vicinity of La Sita restaurant and the Fleet Bank parking lot. The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management (DEM) is currently working on the design for this trail, and is consulting with Ayer town officials in order to maximize the number of parking spaces planned for the site. Because of the complementary nature of peak-use times, designating the new lot for both commuter and trail user parking has been proposed.

The **West Main Street** downtown district begins just beyond the railroad overpass and extends westward to the Devens gateway. For the most part, this district is residential in use, interspersed with a few pockets of clustered businesses. Beginning at the overpass, the first segment of business use extends along West Main Street for approximately two blocks before it is interrupted by a sizable stretch of residential homes. It includes an auto parts retail shop and a pizzeria. The Main Street theme of street trees, historic street lamps and banners also extends into this two-block area. Its location adjacent to the core downtown district and the visual connection provided by the sidewalk treatment effectively connects this small portion of West Main Street with the pedestrian-oriented, commercial core of downtown Ayer.

The largest of the commercial-use clusters on West Main is located further west, toward the Devens end of the street, and mainly consists of a large plaza, a gas station and a few neighboring establishments (some now vacant). The growth and former success of these operations was largely due to the cluster's location near the Fort, and business has consequently suffered during this period of inactivity at Devens.

Despite the majority of residential use, the West Main Street corridor is zoned for commercial and business development, and for this reason the downtown community prefers to consider the entire length of the street as part of downtown. While it may be appropriate to designate the whole length of the West Main Street corridor as a subsection of downtown Ayer's overall business district, it is not likely that pedestrian activity from the core area will venture to the far end of West Main Street. For this reason, it may not be necessary to extend the full sidewalk treatment along the entire length of the corridor, however, continuing the street lamp theme to the Devens gateway will better integrate West Main Street as one of the downtown districts.

The **East Main Street** district consists of the street corridor extending from the bridge that distinguishes it from Main Street to the traffic circle where State Routes 2A and 111 meet. Because this corridor is around-the-bend and across the bridge from centrally-located Main Street, it seems to be the district that is most removed from the downtown core. Despite this, it is the location of such fundamental civic facilities as the town library and a county courthouse.

In addition, much of downtown's through-traffic is directed from the rotary and into downtown via East Main Street, providing a first impression of Ayer for many newcomers. For this reason it is important that East Main Street convey a very strong and positive image for Ayer. The entry onto East Main from the rotary is a significant gateway into the town, and provides a good opportunity to direct visitors to the center of downtown.

East Main Street is composed of a mixture of residential, business and commercial uses, however it is almost entirely zoned as general residence. The area north of the street is heavily vegetated, and includes a railroad right-of-way, while the area south primarily consists of residential side streets that further contribute to the non-business character of East Main Street. The nature of the business that exists within the district is very compatible with its residential character; these uses are permitted because they are pre-existing, entail unique circumstances or have obtained special permits. An example of a unique circumstance is Ayer Auto Trim, a non-residential use that is allowed by-right; the shop itself is situated on a portion of the lot that is zoned light industrial because it is adjacent to the railroad right-of-way. The assigned zoning can effectively control the character of this district, ensuring that new business is allowed only by special permit, and that it is unobtrusive. Some of these are home businesses, such as a landscaping company and a graphic design studio. Others include a corner variety store and a small motel.

It is important that the East Main Street district be more visually connected with the larger part of Downtown as well. This can be addressed by extending the decorative street lamp theme along East Main Street, and by increasing the density of large street trees within the planting strip in order to shrink the scale of the street and thus make it more pedestrian friendly. Because the district is zoned as general residence, it can be fairly difficult for business to develop here. If the expansion of business on East Main Street is important to the residents of Ayer, a zone change should be considered. As mentioned above, business and commercial uses can be very reasonably compatible with residential use, if appropriately regulated.

### **2.3. Design Issues**

#### **Design Consistency and Signage**

Inasmuch as the four areas of downtown Ayer are distinct, it is important that they be presented in a unified manner if they are to convey themselves as a complete business district. Because of variations in use, as well as the distance of some areas from the traditional core of downtown, it is important that the districts share enough common design elements to be perceived as a single, cohesive downtown. A major problem in presenting the four districts as a single



business zone is that they are not visually connected. This is particularly a problem for East Main Street, as there is no direct line of sight to draw pedestrians from the downtown core. One obvious way to achieve better unity is to extend the theme of historic lighting and downtown banners throughout the district. Another tactic is to ensure that common elements receive consistent treatment. For example, all pedestrian crosswalks should be painted yellow, as they are on Main and East Main Streets. In addition, proper signage can lead people to other districts, attractions, or to additional parking locations.

A significant design concern for all of downtown, but particularly for the Main Street historic district, is the lack of sufficient sign guidelines. This has resulted in the inconsistent use and design of business and retail signage throughout downtown, in some cases being so chaotic as to provide more distraction than information (see Figure 2.6). This is an important issue as



**Figure 2.6.** *Confusing use of signage on Main Street.*

signs do more than direct a customer to a business location—they project an image, good or bad, and collectively they help define a character for downtown. Thus coordination of storefronts and signage in an appropriate style is an important design consideration for an historic district. Some aspects of sign control which should be considered are: location, colors, materials, style of typeface or graphics, and context in relation to surrounding buildings.



For downtown areas beyond Main Street, the primary issue with regard to signage is ensuring that it is designed with the desirable audience in mind. In most cases, signs are directed toward high-speed automobile traffic, which typically means they are large and placed high enough to be seen by passing cars. While this may be suitable for a commercial strip area, it is not welcoming for pedestrians. In districts where pedestrian traffic is desired, signage should also be placed at eye-level. More specific sign guidelines are provided in Appendix B.

### **Pedestrian Access and Circulation**

Ayer's Main Street district is distinct from other downtown areas within the region for its high concentration of multi-story brick commercial structures. These lend a very traditional character to the downtown and establish a spatial order that is well-suited for pedestrian use. The density and unity of these buildings is a direct result of the 1872 fire which devastated the entire center. Many of the brick structures which currently exist in the core—particularly along the northern side of Main Street—were constructed between 1872 and 1898, and thus reflect vernacular architectural styles which were popular during this time period. Historic buildings downtown possess the character, tradition, fine workmanship and comfortable scale that no shopping center can duplicate. These structures are an asset to Ayer which owners and town residents should take pride in, and which—with some rehabilitation efforts—can be attractive to visitors as well.

One of the few drawbacks inherent in historic properties is that they often are not easily remedied to comply with ADA requirements, or that small business owners often cannot afford to make necessary changes on their own. This is not necessarily a difficult problem to address, but it is a concern of breadth for Main Street in Ayer, where 49 out of 55 establishments are not ADA accessible (including the Town Hall). The majority of facilities in violation are street-level, one-story retail establishments that are not required to provide public rest room service. The sole barrier for many of these properties then, is simply the threshold over the sidewalk entryway.

The Main Street core of downtown is the most pedestrian-oriented of the four districts; this is largely established by the scale and density of the buildings there. This attribute is enhanced by several additional elements that combine to portray a safe and pleasing environment. By virtue of its extensive length, it is not likely that all four districts in downtown Ayer will combine to form a single pedestrian-oriented shopping center. However, specific design remedies can be used to draw pedestrians further from the Main Street core and into the other three districts. Some of these remedies include: ensuring that the circulation path, usually in the form of a sidewalk and crosswalks, is consistent and easy to follow; the path should be buffered from automobile traffic (by a planting strip or a parking area along the street, for instance) and somewhat protected from the elements with the use of shade trees or awnings. In addition, the

pedestrian environment should be tidy and non-threatening, but above all, these areas must be visually accessible if they are to succeed in luring foot-traffic.

This is particularly relevant for Park Street which, because its design is not pedestrian-oriented, captures little, if any, of Main Street's foot traffic, despite its proximity. Beginning at the Main Street intersection and heading north onto Park Street, the treatment of sidewalk material and design changes abruptly, street trees and decorative lamp posts are discontinued, and pedestrian flow is neither consistent nor clearly laid-out along some portions of the street. However, on a scale as small as the downtown Park Street district, it is entirely possible to design for both pedestrians and automobiles. Additional pedestrian amenities can be provided, and the circulation paths can be designed to maintain a consistent flow and to keep intersections between pedestrians and automobiles at a minimum.

Some of the physical elements that contribute to providing a common theme throughout downtown also perform double duty in enhancing the pedestrian appeal of an area as well. For instance, historic street lamps not only contribute to the character of a streetscape, but their relatively low height helps to establish a scale that is at a human level. Shade trees can also enhance the human scale of a streetscape by narrowing the perception of road width, in addition to providing shade and beauty. Furthermore, traffic can be effectively slowed with the use of stop signs or traffic signals at every intersection, and by the visual effect of many visible pedestrian crosswalks. The yellow color of these is preferable to white because it conveys a message that cautions drivers.

### **Rail Trail**

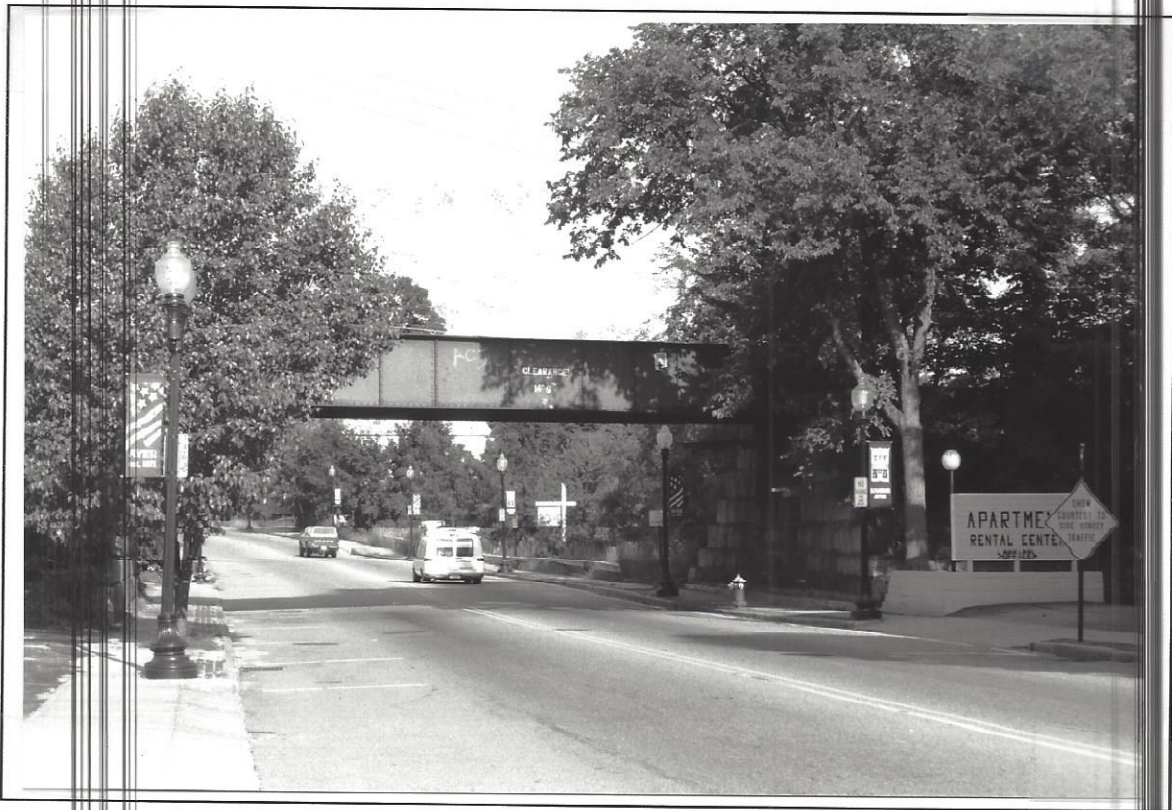
The development of the Nashua River Bicycle Rail Trail holds a great deal of consumer potential for Ayer's downtown businesses. Because this facility will attract such a large number of users, it is imperative for the Town to ensure that it is designed to provide ample parking space as well as a highly visible and easily accessible entryway. The general consensus among other towns with rail trail access is that the resource itself is certain to draw a high volume of activity, and that the efficiency with which this is absorbed by the sponsoring community depends largely on adequate planning. If properly addressed, the new trail development can present a great opportunity to expand Ayer's economy as well. In addition to parking, bike trail users will have a need for food and refreshments, public rest rooms and resting areas, and possibly bicycle or skate parts and repairs. Downtown merchants seem to be very aware of the impact that such a resource will have on business; the owner of La Sita restaurant (located adjacent to the proposed parking area for the trail) already has renovation plans for his property that will involve changes to make his business more welcoming for trail



users. In particular, he plans to re-design the back side of the building in a more colorful and inviting manner.

### **Gateways**

As previously mentioned, downtown Ayer is a business and commercial center that serves surrounding towns and the region. An important district such as this should be adequately designated to clearly direct people to the activity center. Ayer can be identified as a special place with the use of gateways—distinguishing elements that denote the transition from one place to another. A gateway can be in the form of a sign, a threshold, or even a traffic light. Most of Ayer's through-traffic from the north enters downtown at Park Street, and from the west comes into downtown via East Main Street. These are two important means of accessing downtown Ayer and represent opportunities to capture the attention of many visitors. Since there is a problem with excessive traffic speed along Park Street, a gateway that includes a stop sign or traffic signal may be most appropriate at this location. If vehicles passing through are forced to stop at the intersection of Bishop Street, there is better opportunity for drivers to make note of a sign welcoming them into downtown Ayer. The use of street trees, yellow crosswalks, and other pedestrian amenities discussed above can provide further encouragement for traffic to maintain a reasonable speed through the remainder of Downtown.



**Figure 2.7.** *Railroad overpass between Main and East Main Streets, from Main.*

The rotary at the far end of East Main Street also directs a significant amount of traffic to and through downtown. The signage that currently exists at the rotary for this purpose is a standard Massachusetts Highway issue. Citizens of Ayer can do much better for themselves with the installation of a custom-designed sign that welcomes visitors to Ayer and points them in the direction of downtown. This can let drivers know unmistakably that they are being invited to visit a distinctive place. Furthermore, a well-designed sign can project a positive image of Ayer by conveying a sense of community pride and character.

Finally, the railroad overpass that distinguishes the East Main Street district from the Main Street core can serve as a gateway into the heart of downtown (see Figure 2.7). This is a wonderful opportunity for the community to celebrate downtown and display their unique character by painting the bridge.

### **2.3. Parking and Traffic Issues**

Ayer's zoning bylaws are not entirely clear or comprehensive on the issue of parking requirements. In general, off-street parking provisions are required of new construction and new use development in all districts. Uses existing at the time of the establishment of this bylaw were exempted from this requirement, as it was impossible for most of the densely-developed property within the downtown shopping district to accommodate any parking on-site. Currently, a few public lots and parallel on-street parking provide the spaces necessary for patrons of these establishments. However, the on-site parking requirement does apply to the development of new uses, which poses a unique problem for the re-use and development of second-story properties on Main Street.

Even without the development of new uses, providing additional parking for Main Street properties is a problem because space here is already insufficient. The town is considering a new location for some much-needed additional parking within the Main Street area, either in the form of a lot or a deck. However, according to the current bylaws, this will not fulfill the on-site minimum parking requirements for each new use development. With this restriction, a new lot will alleviate some but not all of downtown Ayer's parking concerns. For these reasons it is necessary to re-examine and amend the zoning bylaws with regard to shared, on-site and minimum parking requirements.

In general, parking downtown is less of a problem beyond the Main Street area. Most new business development can adequately accommodate necessary parking by designing lots on-site (and thus can easily fulfill requirements outlined in the zoning bylaws). Parking can be more of a challenge for home business establishments if space is needed for more vehicles than can fit



in the driveway. Roadside parking is not allowed along state-owned highways, including Park and East Main Streets, making some form of on-site parking a necessity for downtown districts that have no public parking lots.

Because these are state roads, they are also truck routes; downtown sees a good deal of heavy traffic as well as traffic volume. During peak hours, traffic through downtown becomes very congested, particularly at the corner of Park and Main Streets, where there is only a stop sign to regulate flow at this awkward intersection (see Figure 2.8).



**Figure 2.8.** *Intersection of Park and Main Streets.*

### III. COMMUNITY VISIONING: PLANNING CHARRETTE SUMMARY

#### 3.1. Overview

This report is a summary of the ideas and strategies that emerged as a result of the charrette held in Ayer on July 20, 1996. Charrette participants represented a broad range of interests, primarily including property owners and merchants of the primary commercial and business corridors in Ayer. Also participating were representatives from various town boards and offices, including the planning board, the zoning board of appeals, the historical commission, and the police department.

The majority of charrette participants had regularly attended weekly meetings to discuss pertinent and timely issues which influence Ayer's commercial districts.

This portion of the report is presented in two sections:

**Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats:** This section summarizes the range of perceptions and realities as expressed by charrette participants. The goal of this brainstorming exercise is to be able to articulate both positive and negative factors, and to maximize strengths while attempting to remedy or alleviate weaknesses.

**Goals and Actions:** The preliminary goals and actions summarized in this report are derived from and directly address the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats defined by the participants.

#### 3.2. Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

The first phase of this two-part charrette is intended to provide a snapshot of the current situation of Ayer's commercial and business district, as perceived by the town members who are most closely associated with it. This involves identifying any number of significant strengths and weaknesses inherent in Ayer's physical environment and its circumstances, as well as pointing out any perceived threats and opportunities which may be looming on the horizon. To hammer these out, participants are broken into small groups for discussion, with each group reaching a consensus with regard to the top five strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats which face Ayer.



## **Strengths**

- Ayer is centrally located and is a retail hub for the surrounding area towns.
- Ayer is also centrally located with regard to transportation access (rail, I-495, Route 2).
- There is a high volume of traffic flow through Ayer, representing potential customers and visitors who may spend money.
- Ayer has a Downtown Business Association.
- There is teamwork and entrepreneurial spirit among town residents and business people in Ayer, and citizen participation in planning and decision-making processes.
- Ayer has a strong, industrially-based economy.
- There are a good number of housing starts in Ayer, indicating a growing population and a healthy economy.
- Ayer has a well-established, traditional downtown district.
- There is a low/no vacancy rate for downtown shops, in conjunction with additional retail space (further from the core area) for future growth.
- New business growth continues, with Aubuchon Hardware and IC Credit Union expected to move in on Park Street.
- The proximity of Devens will increase local retail demand.
- Infrastructure (sewer) is an asset because it is readily available for any potential new development.
- Ayer is within commuting distance from Boston (35 miles) and has affordable housing.
- Many central activity centers, such as banking, the post office and the MBTA station, remain in the Downtown.
- Ayer has many civic and other resources, such as the new library, hospital, courthouse complex, and Devens.
- There is a high quality of life in Ayer, which entails a sense of community, citizen motivation and commitment, decision making and the drive to follow-through.
- Ayer has a good school system.
- Ayer's population is diverse.

## **Weaknesses**

- The area has a limited number of parking spaces to serve the downtown and directional signs for lots are inadequate.
- There is a lack of police enforcement of loitering, parking violations, and speeding throughout downtown.
- Teenagers loiter because there is no other appropriate place for them to go for general recreation and activity.
- Poor management and lack of building maintenance conveys image of a lack of care, particularly along Main and West Main Streets.



- Street pole lighting along Park Street is not sufficiently bright and should be stylistically consistent with Main Street lighting.
- Many downtown parking spaces which should be available for shoppers are instead taken-up by downtown employees.
- The MBTA parking facility needs to be upgraded and expanded.
- Absentee landlords show a lack of interest in downtown property upkeep and appearance.
- The general public perception of Ayer is poor.
- A lack of consistency in signage styles portrays a “honky-tonk” image.
- Poor communication from Downtown Business Association.
- Zoning regulations need to be re-evaluated to better address home businesses, sign regulations, store-front churches, adult uses, and leakage out of Downtown.
- Despite speed limit signs, traffic throughout downtown is too fast.
- The full occupancy of retail space may hinder the ability to readily alter the mix to better serve visitors and rail trail users.
- There are currently 49 shops in violation of ADA accessibility requirements.
- Geographical constraints pose physical limitations on Main Street, particularly with regard to parking issues.

### **Opportunities**

- To maximize the potential economic benefits of the planned rail trail.
- There is the potential for spin-off businesses from Devens.
- Commuter rail patrons are a market which downtown businesses could potentially tap.
- Quality historic building stock can be rehabilitated.
- There is room to improve signage and marketing.
- Job Corps.
- High volume of through-traffic could be potential customers if there were good reasons for them to stop.
- Quality infrastructure and good tax base.
- There is a good variety of affordable housing stock, representing the potential to attract new residents.
- There is an opportunity to market Ayer’s natural and recreational resources, such as the rail trail, fishing, quality of life/low stress, cultural amenities.
- Business grants/funding will be available for renovation and improvements.
- New library for the benefit of young children and the entire community.
- There is room for transportation improvements, i.e., bus transportation.
- Second story vacancies on Main Street can be developed as affordable housing.

## **Threats**

- Businesses are not customer-friendly enough—stores frequently do not open until long after commuter rail patrons have departed.
- There is a general fear of not being able to get something.
- Loitering is perceived as threatening and thus scares off some potential customers.
- Employee parking must be corrected; there are proposals to eliminate Main Street parking altogether.
- Participation and enthusiasm could turn into complacency, apathy, or a lack of willingness to improve.
- National chains and discount (“big box”) retailers, malls and strip malls.
- Poor planning could result in many missed opportunities.
- Devens Business Community could have a deflating effect on Ayer’s economy.
- Heavy traffic and congestion through downtown.
- Outdated zoning bylaws deters development.
- Too many regulations on rehabilitation projects and building upgrades could be prohibitive.
- Run-down appearance of Downtown could detract potential customers.
- The unavoidable effects of the national economy on Ayer’s.

## **3.3. Goals and Actions**

The following goals and actions are the result of discussion among the focus groups and provide a preliminary guide to the priority of issues and concerns raised by charrette participants. Some are more realistic than others, however it is of notable mention that this particular group shows a high level of overall agreement in the identification of several major issues, and of how they should be addressed. Their goals and actions, outlined below in order of priority, provide a tentative direction for future study. In addition, participants are also aware that plans to address a few of the other issues outlined above are already underway, including MBTA plans to make site improvements and to increase commuter rail service to Ayer.

### **Goals**

- To review, revise, amend and update sign and zoning bylaws.
- To improve the physical image of downtown and optimize the mix of retail business.
- To ensure a properly-planned rail trail.
- To create an Ayer Business Association.
- To provide a recreation facility and opportunities for youth.



- To improve public perception of Ayer's schools, public safety, DPW, and town government.
- To promote resources and project a common theme for Ayer through strategic and effective marketing.
- To improve pedestrian safety and accessibility.
- To maintain and preserve evidence of the historical significance of Ayer.
- To ensure consistent signage throughout downtown.
- To improve pedestrian environment with additional lighting and a semi-annual facade and sidewalk clean-up.
- To promote the cooperation of downtown businesses and Devens Business Community.
- To ensure an equitable distribution of sign and facade grant money.

### **Actions**

- To incorporate community involvement in updating the Comprehensive Plan.
- To program more youth activities, including a full-time program director and a location for after school activities and supervision.
- To develop and implement a marketing strategy for Ayer's businesses.
- To implement and enforce sign regulations.
- To conduct a survey for improving the mix of retail selection in downtown.
- To modify zoning bylaws.
- To prevent grandfathering in the implementation of new regulation requirements.
- To work with signage consultants on gateway sign for Ayer.
- To get started with grant program.
- To ensure communication and coordination between Devens and Downtown businesses.
- To address the issue of traffic speeds by conducting a survey to determine whether or not there is a problem which needs to be remedied.
- To maintain good organization and participation of property owners and merchants.
- To produce a tourist/visitor information guide for Ayer.
- To re-institute the celebration of an annual festival in downtown.
- To preserve historical properties without imposing too many restrictions on owners.
- To use grant money to expand the historic street lamp theme from the library to West Main Street overpass and up Park Street, ensuring that illumination is adequate for safety.
- To create a "How to Start a Business in Ayer" brochure.
- To practice proper planning with youth participants and providers.
- To demand better communication from and between town boards and Downtown Business Association.

- To paint more crosswalks and improve sidewalk maintenance for better pedestrian circulation.
- To have the chamber of commerce or a service/rotary club sponsor an annual downtown clean-up.

### 3.4 Participant Comments and Summary

Participant commentary at the end of the planning process was overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic, with a number of people expressing a strong desire to maintain the current level of communication and citizen involvement. Some town representatives and officials expressed that seeing such an interest on the part of the community was a reinforcement for their own efforts, and how important it is to keep communication lines open. In general, participants felt that they had acquired a greater awareness of issues, and several expressed a determination to do their part in promoting progress for downtown Ayer. Most believe that all of the goals the group had developed were possible to achieve if they could stay organized and continue to participate, and many are anxious to get started with physical improvement programs.

Over the last few years, a national preference for small town living has become very evident to planners and designers. Much of what contributes to the quality of life associated with a small town lifestyle is the sense of community that its members enjoy. In their book *Creating Community Anywhere*, Carolyn Shaffer and Kristin Anundsen have developed the following working definition of community:

Because community today can take so many different forms, it resists being pinned down by definition. But after much research and interviewing, we did develop a context for talking about it. The basic five-point definition we have arrived at is both strong and inclusive. It contains a time factor and encompasses both traditional forms and the newer ones that social pioneers are now forging.

Community is a dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people:

- participate in common practices;
- depend upon one another;
- make decisions together;
- identify themselves as part of something larger than the sum of their individual relationships; and
- commit themselves for the long term to their own, one another's, and the group's well-being.

Certain timeless qualities epitomize every type of community, whether traditional or newly emerging. Chief among these is commitment. Commitment as a group—whether family, place, clear communication, or the healthy working out of a conflict—requires that community members embody such other timeless values as trust, honesty, compassion, and respect (10).

The commitment that members of Ayer's community have shown over the last several weeks is just a sample of the positive attitude and dedication which they have exhibited in tackling the many changes which face their town. With this kind of collective concern and pride, Ayer will continue to promise a high quality of life for both its present and future members.



## IV. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1. Design and Signage

Often, good design and quality renovation means nothing more than a new paint scheme, signage and awnings to create a unique business image and pleasing storefront; this applies to all four areas of Ayer's downtown. The results are economical yet dramatic improvements. For historic districts in particular, however, it is important that new designs and renovations respect the style, history, original proportions, lines and textures of the traditional architecture. More importantly than this, though, is that the work is coordinated among all property owners within each district, to ensure that design and style are compatible for a cohesive image.

The use and treatment of **signage** should be relatively consistent throughout each district as well. Because this will likely involve the grandfathering of existing signs, it is recommended that the town provide an incentive for owners to make more immediate changes. Ayer merchants have expressed a concern regarding design guidelines that are overly restrictive, not allowing room for uniqueness in style. As such, guidelines that will direct the use and placement of signage is preferable to specific regulations that can limit interest and variety. Design professionals, downtown merchants and property owners should be involved in developing these guidelines. Once established, the town of Ayer must adopt and enforce them by making necessary amendments to the town zoning bylaws.

To encourage **pedestrian access** beyond the Main Street core, it is crucial for pedestrians to feel safe and comfortable in the shopping environment; this applies to any of the downtown districts where regular foot traffic is desired, particularly along Main Street and the areas immediately adjacent to it. For the benefit of pedestrians, sidewalks should be spacious and buffered from street traffic; they should be somewhat protected from the elements with the use of awnings and/or shade trees. Storefront display windows should be attractive and the overall downtown environment must seem safe and clean. In addition, automobile traffic must be kept at a reasonably slow speed; if crossing the street seems hazardous, the road will effectively become a pedestrian barrier for shops across the street.

In addition to these design considerations, the needs of pedestrian shoppers and out-of-town visitors should also be accounted for with regard to facilities. The coffee shop on Main Street, for example, is a good place for shoppers or bikers to sit down and take a break, purchase refreshments, or wait on a friend; access to public restrooms, pay phones and ATMs would also be useful. The Chamber of commerce can take advantage of places frequented by the out-of-town public with the display of promotional brochures for Ayer businesses and recreational activities.

The **rail trail** for bicycles provides great opportunity for downtown Ayer businesses. The link to the T station is a positive element for a multi-modal transportation system. The link between the bike trail and the T station needs to be formalized. One possible connection is to use the existing crosswalk (see Figure 4.1). This connection will also make the trail more visible and thus more accessible to users. The town of Ayer should make every effort to promote trail use and to tap the market potential of users by catering to their needs.

There is a **drainage problem** on the south side of Main Street. As shown in the existing images (see Figure 4.2), the raised curb detains water on the sidewalk. One possible solution is to raise the sidewalk six inches, as shown in the proposed images, to fill in this void and eliminate the problem. An additional benefit of this solution will be the elimination of the step to reach the finished floor elevation of the stores in order to meet ADA accessibility requirements.

#### **4.2. Gateways**

Two gateways are proposed for the town of Ayer. The southern gateway is the traffic circle at the beginning of East Main Street. This will help to direct traffic to the downtown Ayer business district and the T station. The actual physical solution will depend upon the final plans of the Massachusetts Department of Public Works decision on whether to remove the circle and create a signalized intersection. Whatever the choice, this is the location where the gateway to the town should be located (see Figure 4.3).

The recommended location for the northern gateway is on Park Street at the intersection with Bishop Road. In this case, the gateway marks a change—this is where the road straightens and the major commercial strip begins. This is also the location where vehicular speed should be reduced and controlled, indicating a transition to a more controlled, pedestrian environment. The gateways are also opportunities to memorialize citizens or events significant in the history of Ayer.



Figure 4.1. Proposed link between rail trail and downtown commuter station.

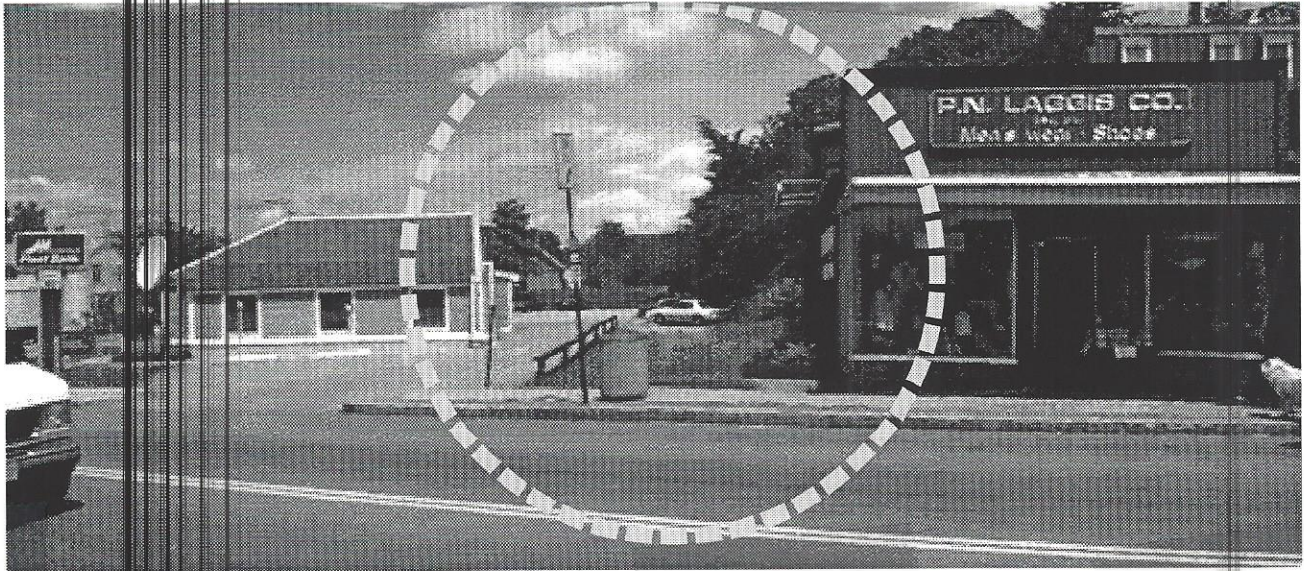
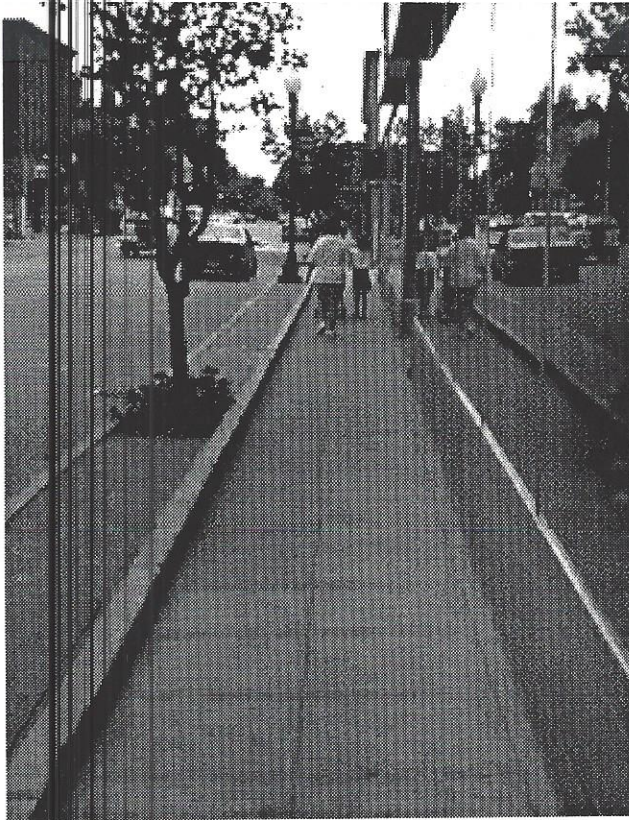
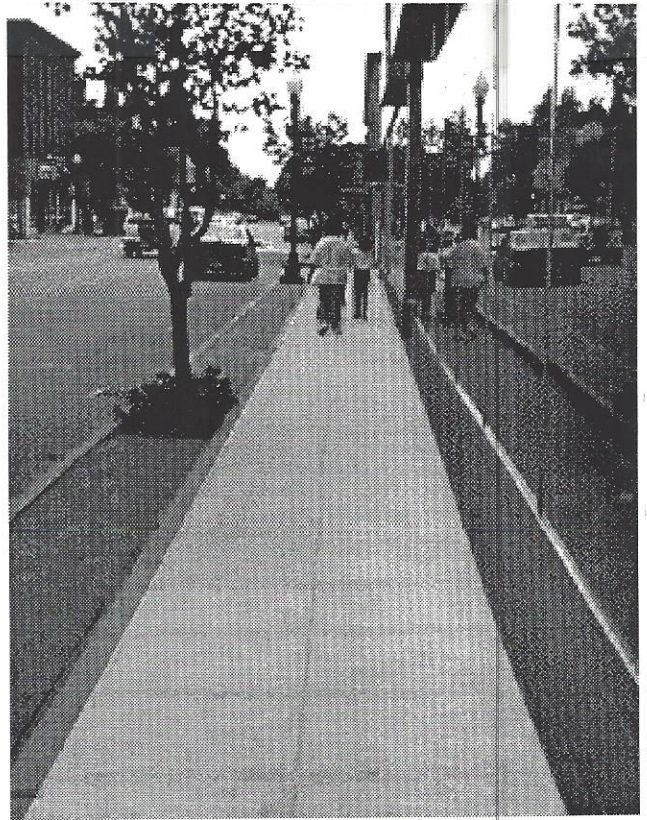




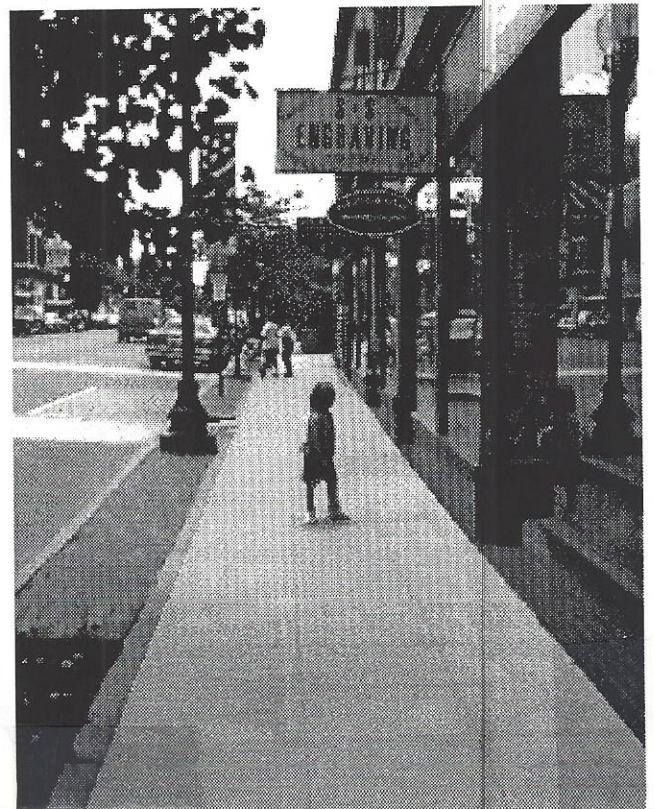
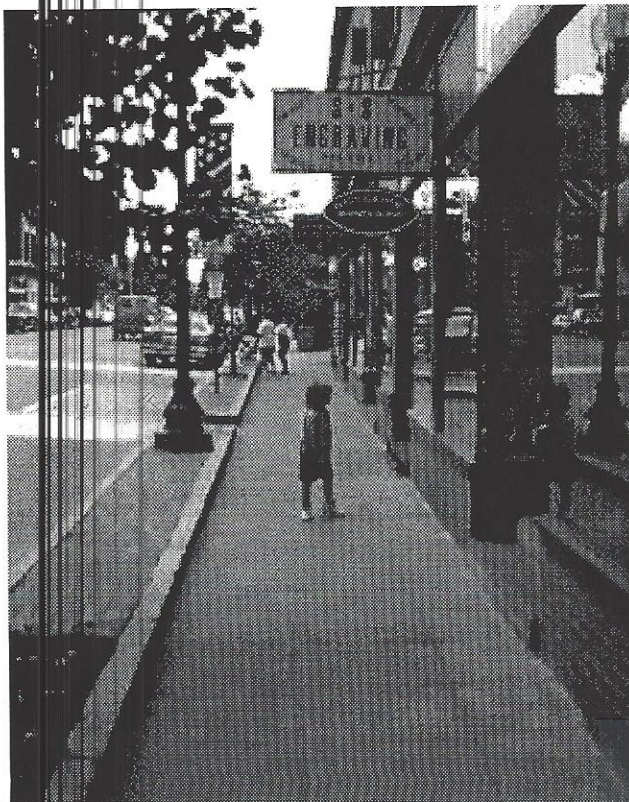
Figure 4.2. Sidewalk drainage on Main Street: existing problem and proposed solution.



Existing



Proposed





**Figure 4.3.** Location of East Main Street gateway.





#### 4.3. Parking and Traffic

To adequately serve the needs of the shoppers, commuters and area merchants, additional parking facilities must be located in downtown Ayer. The town has hired a consultant firm of transportation engineers and planners, Bruce Campbell & Associates, Inc. of Boston, to assess the traffic and parking situation and make recommendations for improvements. It is recommended that the town seriously consider construction of a parking deck on the chosen site to maximize space.

In addition to this municipal lot, development of the rail trail and the upgrading of MBTA's commuter facility will also introduce new parking accommodations to downtown. Because the peak hours will be complementary for these two uses, we recommend that parking be shared. Furthermore, the town should also put up signs that will clearly mark and direct visitors to the appropriate parking facility.

There are numerous strategies for controlling **traffic speed**. The major problems on Park Street are undefined edges and a series of changing speed limits. To address these issues it is proposed that a series of pedestrian crosswalks be established between Main Street and Bishop Road. It is important that these be yellow to match the Main Street crosswalks rather than the white lines that exist now. A series of street trees should be planted along Park Street to narrow the perceived width of the street. These trees can be spaced 100 feet apart so as not to block signs. This combination of vertical and horizontal patterns along with a single, clearly identified speed limit of 25 mph should help reduce the speeding along Park Street.

In addition, a traffic light or a stop sign on Park at the intersection of Bishop Road can halt traffic before it enters into an area of downtown which is more frequented by pedestrians.

During peak hours, traffic congestion through downtown Ayer can be inconvenient. Replacing the stop sign at the corner of Park and Main Streets with a traffic signal should facilitate traffic flow and alleviate much of this problem.



#### **4.4. Zoning**

In general, Ayer's zoning bylaws must be updated. Several of the current document's limitations have been revealed by this study, and certainly many others have been noted in the Comprehensive Plan Update. Zoning regulations have a dominating influence on the future shape that a town will take, and on which old patterns will persist. It is crucial that Ayer take measures to ensure that new development will help establish the community image desirable to citizens, and protect the existing characteristics that are important and valuable.

As mentioned above, amendments to the zoning bylaws must be made with regard to sign guidelines. In addition to this, changes must be made to alleviate on-site parking requirements in downtown's core, so that upper-story properties can be renovated and developed. Mixed use in the downtown must also be allowed if any of these properties are to be developed for residential use. It is also important that zoning bylaws prohibit the development of undesirable uses in the downtown, such as storefront churches and adult uses.

#### **4.5. Funding and Technical Assistance**

The town of Ayer should make arrangements for downtown merchants to have access to a pool of professionals who are available, on a consultant basis, to advise and/or assist local merchants and property owners in making decisions related to their commercial property or business. The town should also facilitate funding assistance or programs that will support private renovation and development efforts in downtown. For instance, low interest loans may be made available to property owners for improvements to buildings downtown. The town may also encourage development by ensuring that the permitting process is efficient. In addition, the Chamber of Commerce could play a key role in advertising Ayer's improved image and in promoting new business and development.

## APPENDICES

- A. Ayer Market Report
- B. Principles of Good Sign Design  
*Broadmeadow Sign Studio, Groton, MA*
- C. Consultant Evaluation of Downtown's Street Trees  
*Michael Davidsohn, University of Massachusetts, Amherst*



## **APPENDIX A**

### **Ayer Market Report**

The 1995 US census figure for total population in Ayer is 2,533; this includes 1,045 households averaging 2.36 persons each; the median household income level in Ayer is \$29,646. Ayer's Shopping Center Total Retail Expenditure Index is 91.7, and the town's 1995 Retail Support Potential is 105,000 square feet. Following is a summary of Ayer's retail market potential, as compared with the overall United States market.

#### **A.1. Demographic Profile of Ayer's Retail Market**

1. Ayer's annual retail spending represents 0.0035% of the total US buying power.
2. Nearly half of all householders in Ayer consist of single adults.
3. Compared with the overall US, Ayer is slightly less likely to have married householders, and single householders are more likely to be male.
4. One-third of Ayer's householders are 25-34 years old; compared with the US, householders in Ayer are much more likely to be 18-24, and much less likely to be 65+.
5. Annual household income in Ayer is highly likely to be at a middle-class level (\$20-74,900).
6. When compared with the overall US, householders in Ayer are much less likely to own their own home (fewer than 45% are homeowners in Ayer).
7. Less than one-third of households in Ayer contain children; of these, children in Ayer are most likely to either be under 2 years or over 12 years of age when compared with the overall US.

#### **A.2. Lifestyle Profile: The Good Life**

1. Households in Ayer are slightly less likely than US households to regularly participate in cultural/arts events.
2. Households in Ayer are much more likely to engage in career-oriented activities than US households; these are activities which generally appeal to a younger population (up to 34 years).
3. When compared with US households, those in Ayer are more likely to have a member who is a frequent flyer.
4. Households in Ayer are much more likely to have a fashion-conscious member than those in the overall US; these people tend to be heavy credit users.
5. Households in Ayer are more likely than US households to have a member who is a fine art/antiques enthusiast; this is a relatively affluent group, with cultural and gourmet preferences.
6. Compared with US households, Ayer is far more likely to have a member who is interested in foreign travel; one-fifth use all-inclusive packages, and one-third use travel agents.
7. When compared with the overall US, households in Ayer are most likely to have a member who is interested in fine foods; these people like to cook for fun, and often prefer to listen to classical music, read Epicurean magazines and watch television news specials.

8. Households in Ayer are slightly less likely than US households to have a member who is interested in home furnishing and decorating.
9. Compared with the US, Ayer is less likely to have a household member who is interested in money-making opportunities such as the lottery and casino gambling.
10. Households in Ayer are just as likely as US households to have a member who is interested in real estate investment; this group is inclined to read business, finance, and sports magazines.
11. Households in Ayer are slightly more interested in stock/bond investments than US households; these people are likely to own mutual funds, money market funds, and common or preferred stock.
12. Compared with the US, households in Ayer are much more likely to have a member who is a wine enthusiast; most tend to drink domestic wines or wine coolers.

### **A.3. High-Tech Activities**

1. Compared with US households, those in Ayer are far more likely to participate in electronics activities; these enthusiasts tend to own computers, video cameras, and CD players, as well as keep-up with science and new technology.
2. Households in Ayer are slightly less likely to participate in home video game activities; most of these households have children under 18.
3. Households in Ayer are a bit more likely than US households to have a member who has an interest in personal computers.
4. Compared with the US, households in Ayer are considerably more likely to have a member who is interested in photography; these enthusiasts are likely to own 35 mm and movie cameras.
5. Compared with the US, households in Ayer are very interested in science fiction; enthusiasts tend to be 25–44 years old, and are well-informed on issues concerning science, nature, the environment and new technology.
6. Ayer's household rate of participation in science/new technology activities is notably higher than the overall US rate; these enthusiasts enjoy using personal computers, reading science magazines, and working with electronic equipment.
7. Nearly half of all households in Ayer are stereo music enthusiasts; this group is likely to own stereos and audio electronic equipment.
8. Households in Ayer are more likely than US households to participate in VCR recording and viewing; this group generally likes to subscribe to cable television, own a PC and purchase home video games.
9. Households in Ayer are more likely than US households to have a member who regularly watches cable t.v., with nearly half of all households in Ayer interested in watching; these viewers regularly watch a variety of pay channels.



#### **A.4. Sports and Leisure**

1. Ayer's household rate of participation in cycling activities is much higher than the overall US; most of these enthusiasts own a bicycle, and nearly half bike at least once per week.
2. Compared with the US, households in Ayer are slightly less likely to have a member interested in boating/sailing activities; few of these enthusiasts own their own boat.
3. Households in Ayer are notably more likely than US households to have a member interested in bowling; most of these enthusiasts own a ball, and one-third bowl once per week.
4. Compared with US households, Ayer is a good deal less likely to have a member who golfs regularly.
5. Ayer's rate of participation in fitness activities is much higher than the total US rate; these enthusiasts like to work out in a gym or health club, participate in aerobic exercise, bicycle, jog and lift weights.
6. Ayer is far more likely than the overall US to have a household member who regularly participates in running; half of these runners jog at least once per week.
7. Ayer's rate of snow ski participation is much, much higher than the overall US rate; most skiers prefer downhill skiing, and less than half enjoy cross country.
8. Ayer's rate of participation in tennis is below the overall US rate; tennis enthusiasts are likely to belong to a country club and to watch tennis on t.v. and attend tournaments.
9. Ayer's rate of participation in fitness walking is considerably below the overall US rate; most of these enthusiasts are 55 years or older.
10. Households in Ayer are far less likely than US households to regularly watch sports on t.v.

#### **A.5. Outdoor Activities**

1. Ayer has a significantly higher rate of participation in camping and hiking activities than the overall US.
2. Ayer's rate of regular participation in fishing activities is slightly lower than the US rate; enthusiasts are more likely to go fresh water fishing, and most own their own rods.
3. Households in Ayer are a bit less likely than US households to have a member who regularly participates in hunting activities; one in four enthusiasts hunt at least once per week.
4. Compared with the US, Ayer is far more likely to have a member who is a motorcycle enthusiast; over one-third of enthusiasts are single males.
5. Compared with the overall US, Ayer is slightly more likely to have a household member who is a recreational vehicle enthusiast; they are likely to also enjoy outdoor activities, including motorcycling.
6. Ayer is a good deal more likely than the overall US to have a household member who is a wildlife enthusiast; this group tends to have an awareness of global issues concerning science, technology and the environment.

## APPENDIX B

### Principles of Good Sign Design



## PRINCIPLES OF GOOD SIGN DESIGN

### 1. LETTER SIZE AND LAYOUT

- Minimize copy to maximize letter size.
- At 45 MPH, a driver has about 2 seconds to read a sign with 4" letters.
- Feature 1 or perhaps 2 important messages, no more.
- Balance positive and negative space.
- Don't lose track of the most important message.

### 2. TYPE STYLES

- Bold is OK, a sign is not the printed page.
- Choose readable typestyles.
- Of five styles, Serif is the most universally recognized.
- Letter spacing should increase with sign size.
- Don't compress fonts too much.
- Different styles create different impressions.

### 3. LOGOS & IMAGES

- Does the image convey the right impression?
- Make sure they work!
- Integrate words and images into a cohesive design.

### 4. COLOR & CONTRAST

- Achieve at least 70% contrast for good readability.
- All colors have a dark, medium or light value.
- For the same size letter, white on black appears larger than black on white.
- Achieve maximum contrast for maximum readability.
- Dark colors look richer and more elegant than light colors.
- Reds and yellows scream for attention.

### 5. ENVIRONMENT & SITING

- Plan sign colors for the environment.
- Consider dark or light backgrounds when siting your sign.
- Watch out for sign creep!
- Integrate modifications with existing signage.
- Maintain your signs.

Broadmeadow Sign Studio: Andrew Field 9/12/95



## APPENDIX C

### Consultant Evaluation of Downtown's Street Trees

Date: Sun, 07 Jul 1996 14:55:42 -0400 (EDT)  
From: Michael Davidsohn <davidsohn@umext.umass.edu>  
Subject: Ayer Street Trees

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Downtown Ayer has two kinds of street trees, Locust and Callery Pear. Both of these trees are satisfactory for use in urban situations particularly the Pear which make up the majority. The condition of all the trees is fair to good considering the conditions they are in. The trees are under stress from several sources the main being lack of root space and soil compaction. Other sources are bark and limb damage from pedestrians and car doors and lack of light.

According to the people I met with there the trees have in the ground for about ten years. Considering their (the trees) age, location, and abundance of stress, most of the trees are in relatively good condition. Some are in very good condition. In some places it appears that the tree roots have begun to heave the sidewalk and tree grates but that was not on all of the trees. This is obviously a liability problem for the town because tripping on the sidewalk is a possibility. The trees branches and the trees themselves are not so big the they cause any grave danger. There did not appear to be a hazard from falling branches or trees although nothing should be ruled out.

My recommendations were that the trees be properly pruned and fertilized (if needed) by the town tree warden or under that persons direction. I also recommended that they begin thinking about how to replace the trees when the time comes. Many things need to be considered -Plant type, adequate root space, light requirements, etc. Having a plan in place now will make the process of replacement when the time comes (5-10 years, a guess) easier and smoother.

The biggest problem any urban street tree encounters is lack of root space. Urban street trees will never become perfect specimens because of all the stress they live with. What must be remembered is that most urban street trees will not live as long as the same tree in a field. These urban street trees must be properly cared for and it must be realized that eventually they will need to be replaced.

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